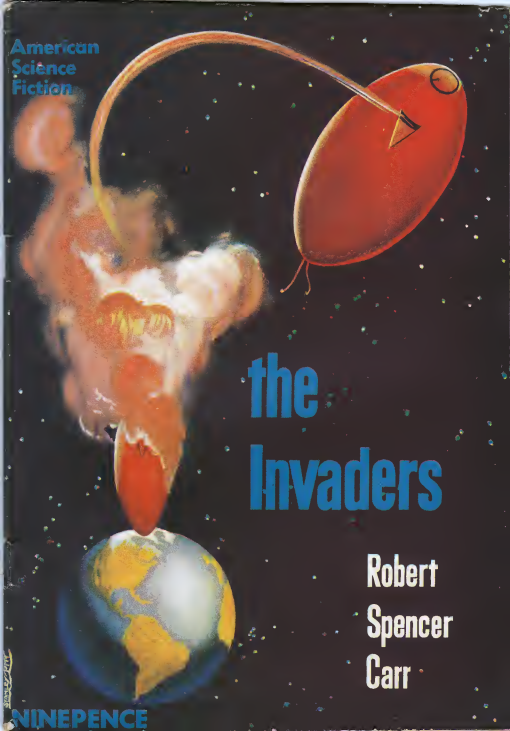


American
Science
Fiction



the Invaders

Robert
Spencer
Carr

NINEPENCE

THE INVADERS

By ROBERT SPENCER CARR

These Easter eggs weren't brought by the bunnies.

MY frank young friend, Ted Bonifield, was on duty at the White House when the Story of the Century broke at dawn on Easter Sunday. Ted is one of the three special White House correspondents assigned to stay near the President at all times, in case something should happen suddenly.

Something did, and it was Ted who sent out those first astounding news flashes that stopped our nation on its way to church last Sunday and started us digging foxholes on the nearest lawn. It was an hour before any other reporters could reach the White House through the cordon of marines. Martial law had been declared. We were simply trapped there on the White House lawn and forced to witness a spectacle which the eyes of mortal man had not previously beheld.

If anyone in Washington had had a premonition of great events impending, it was Bette Pringle, the previous evening. Girls in love are often psychic. As she tucked her typewriter in for the night, she confided, "I have a funny feeling something wonderful is going to happen very soon."

Ted winked at me. "She feels that way all the time lately." Bette's ring winked back at him.

"So do you, lucky dog," I said, smilingly fondly in my beard.

We had called for Bette at her office. We hadn't far to go. Bette works in the White House office wing as private secretary to my boss, who is not a politician, but a physicist.

Part of the New Look in government.

It was past six and everybody else had gone home, but poor little Bette was still transcribing some long-winded man's dictation. Ted and I were indignant. We also knew better than to breathe before she'd finished.

I tiptoed to my desk. Again it was piled high with telegrams from good Americans who did not want a war with Russia. No one where I work wants war either. For our pains, we'd sweated out the worst week ever. At noon on Good Friday the Air Force was alerted. Saturday night, Alaska was blacked out. Downstairs, the President was still at his desk watching the Intelligence ticker tap out history's closing quotations on the falling stocks of peace. Calmly he issued the precautionary orders that kept our country on its toes. His family was at the farm for the week-end. He had the loneliest job in the world that night.

Knowing what we knew, Ted and I were glum, but Bette, who pretends she knows nothing and is smarter than us both, soon cheered us up. She whipped the last page from her electric typewriter and swung around with a smile.

"Initial this, please," she suggested shyly, and I hastened to obey.

I read her perfect typing with respect. It turned out to be her transcript of a sh-h-h report I'd made that morning on climatological bacteriology. I saw, to my surprise, that Bette had recorded every dismal scientific term correctly. The little

girl could not have known what some of those nine-legged words meant. I'm none too sure myself, and I invented them. I looked at her pretty little face and shook my shaggy head in wonderment.

"How do you do it?" I marvelled.

"Oh, I just keep my mind a blank," she laughed. "I let dictation whiz through me as if I were a radio."

"A small portable," said Ted, picking her up and standing her on my desk like a doll. "Doc has invited us out to dinner."

"Delighted," she said. "We're always on our best behaviour when we go out with Doc." She hopped down and picked up an artist's portfolio. Bette dabbles with water-colours, quite cleverly, as a hobby. "I'm ready," she announced.

"You're not going to lug that around all evening, are you, darling?" Ted asked in the fond, exasperated tone a happily engaged couple will sometimes use, as if for practice. "Leave your paints here. You'll probably have to work to-morrow. I do, Doc does."

Then was when she made her prediction that something wonderful was going to happen. It turned out to be true. Then she put her artist's kit away like a good little girl, which she is; and we walked out into the gloaming. It was Easter Eve, with enchantment in the air, but I am sorry to report that Ted and Bette had their usual argument. Bette wanted to keep her exciting, well paid Civil Service job as confidential secretary to scientists. Ted wanted to go home and run the country newspaper his father left him, but he would not leave his Washington job until Bette said yes and went with him. During dinner she said many nice things, but none of them was "Yes."

After dinner, he took her home. At midnight he came back to my bachelor digs to listen to the morning news broadcasts from Europe on my short-wave set. None of the news was good. The world was on the ragged edge. Like lots of other folks that night, we were too worried to sleep.

About 4 a.m. we started out to attend an Easter Sunrise Service. There was nothing left to do but pray for a miracle. We were walking south-east on Pennsylvania Avenue, facing the White House, when Ted saw the thing in the sky. He had thrown his head back to draw a deep breath of fresh dawn air. His eyes swung casually across the greying sky, snapped back to a speck, and narrowed keenly.

After a while he relaxed and yawned and said, "It's only a weather balloon. For a minute I thought I was seeing things." We strolled along. An early sparrow chirped in the dim stillness. I looked where Ted pointed, very high and straight ahead of us. The sky was clear and cloudless. The sun began to rise.

I yawned, too, and said, "The darn thing seems to be falling."

Unconsciously we'd both begun to walk a little faster.

Ted said, in a wide-awake voice, "Balloons don't fall straight down unless they're busted. This one isn't. See, it's oval." We jogged into a trot, not taking our eyes off the sky.

"Then what is it?" I wheezed.

Ted said, his words joggling out as he passed me, "Whatever it is, it's falling on the White House, and that's my beat." He broke into a run.

Ted had been talking to the guard in the booth at the White House gate for a minute before I lumbered up. They were both on telephones, talking fast. As we hurried in, Allen darted out, buckling on an extra gun belt. Allen is the chief of the White House detail of the Secret Service. His duty is to guard with his life the life of the President of the United States. Allen is a craggy, crusty man, because he has to be. He grazed us with a fast, hard look and raised his binoculars.

Ted came up beside him and asked quietly, "What is it?"

"Don't know. Don't like it. Radar should have picked it up long ago. We'll soon see what it is." He stepped back into his office. Through the

lighted window we could see him at three telephones, wasting no words.

By the watch upon my shaking wrist, I timed what happened next. One minute: Swarms of extra guards came boiling out of somewhere and surrounded the White House. They wore steel helmets, carried tommy guns and gas masks.

Two minutes: Police radio cars were stopping all civilian traffic into the White House area.

Three minutes and a squadron of our fastest fighter planes was roaring up into the sunrise sky. In the cold upper air their hot jets left fiery trails like comets.

They reached the thing in thirty seconds. At their approach, it stopped in mid-air and hung motionless. Now we knew it was no stray balloon. The thing was consciously controlled. It could perceive.

The squadron-leader looped in alone and looked it over. Banked in tight spiral turns, he examined the object closely from all sides.

In the Smithsonian Institution today you can hear those priceless wire-tape recordings of the historic words that baffled major was reporting by radio to his colonel on the ground. With Air Force informality, unaware that he spoke for posterity, the laconic phrases filtered down with a Texas drawl:

"Mac, this baby sure don't look like anything of ours. . . . It's red, a metal shell about thirty feet in diameter, tapered at one end, like an egg. . . . It's got a funny mark painted on the side, like identification. A circle with an arrow pointing off at two o'clock. . . . Does that mean anything? It does not answer signals. . . . Can't see how this dam thing stays in the air. It's got no jets, no prop, no control surfaces, no nothing. . . . Something's screwy up here. We better get rid of it, colonel. It is not ours. Repeat: It is not ours."

His commanding officer must have remembered Pearl Harbour, another peaceful Sunday morning while Americans trustingly slept. He decided that

this time things were going to be different. The order to attack was given six minutes after the object was first sighted.

One by one, our sleek Shooting Stars peeled off and dived at the intruder. The rivet-hammer racket of machine-guns split the hushed Easter sky above the capital, bringing frightened faces to hotel windows. A soldier handed me a helmet and a gas mask. I stood holding them foolishly in my arms.

Allen said, "I'm putting the President in the bomb shelter. I'll be back in a minute." He sprinted into the White House and bounded up the stairs.

Our fighter planes threw everything they had at the invader . . . but nothing happened. Somehow, impossibly, our best combat pilots missed a stationary target bigger than several barn doors. Nothing was wrong with their ammunition. They were loaded for bear. Live shells were cutting into rooftops all over Washington and starting fires.

Something was spoiling our pilots' aim, something uncanny. They couldn't all have missed. By rights, the red thing should be falling now, shot down in flames. But it was not. It just floated there serenely in the blushing sky, not offering resistance, not doing anything.

I think we all understand by now how that last pilot felt. He was end man on the squadron line, and he had seen it all. We could tell by the determined way he kicked his hot new ship wing-down into her last dive that he had decided he was not going to miss. There is always one last way to keep from missing, once.

The President appeared in the wide-open window of his bedroom. He leaned out and looked up. He was in rumpled blue pyjamas and his hair was tousled. Allen appeared behind him, trying to pull him back out of danger. An aerial cannon shell exploded in the White House driveway. The Chief waved Allen back and watched the battle in the sky intently, with no trace of fear.

We all saw it happen, though many tried to look away. The last pilot dived to crash his target. He came in straight and steady, firing everything he had, without effect, but when he was almost there, his plane was flung off to the right by an unseen force. His left wing broke off against thin air.

A second later, the ejector under the pilot's seat threw him clear of his spinning plane. Another second and his parachute ripped open. The wingless plane crashed into the Potomac River with a splash explosion that threw a column of smoky water as high as the Washington Monument. The rest of the squadron, travelling at four miles a minute, were by now far out over Arlington, regrouping. Two more squadrons were ordered aloft from different fields, north and south of Washington.

The parachuting pilot sailed slowly over the White House, directly underneath the big red thing. We saw him turning in his harness to get a closer look at it.

The President called down to an aide who had arrived in haste, "Have them bring that pilot here to me, if he's not hurt." Then Allen firmly drew the President inside, out of danger. Fire-engine bells were clanging closer.

Left alone in the smoke-streaked sky, the big red egg started to come down again, more slowly. It dropped toward us in a vertical controlled descent, hesitating now and then as if anxious not to alarm us any more than we were already. Which was plenty. If I had not been scared stiff I would have noticed, as Ted did, that the weird craft was coming in cautiously for a landing in much the same manner as you or I might hopefully approach an unknown shore.

But it was too late now for such fanciful notions. Our hair-trigger machinery of defence had swung into action, according to law. A motorised anti-aircraft battery arrived at fifty miles an hour, skidded to a halt, swung into position, and began to

pump ten-pound projectiles into the sky at the rate of one per second.

The red egg halted its descent and hung unharmed in the stream of high-explosive shells. Now it was less than five hundred feet above our heads. A boy could have hit it with a BB gun. But artillery could not.

"What's that identification mark painted on the thing?" Ted asked.

"Hammer and sickle," said the battery commander.

"It looks to me more like a circle with a short arrow on the upper right-hand quarter," Ted said. "What country uses that wing marking?"

"Russia," said the battery commander.

I could see the symbol plainly now. It seemed to me that I had seen it somewhere years ago in a book about astrology, but I could not remember what it meant. When they asked me, I shook my head. It was no time for guessing games. Hell was popping. Shell splinters showered down like smoking hail. I put my helmet on. Somewhere I heard windows breaking. Ted ran past me with a camera. His face was cut.

The baffled battery commander ordered tracer shells. And then, for the first time, we understood why the big red thing could not be hit. The invader was surrounded by an invisible envelope of some totally new kind of force. It shed shellfire like raindrops. The tracers flew at their target leaving white ribbons of phosphorus smoke to mark their trajectories, but at the last split second, about ten feet from their goal, they snapped into a smart out-curve, like something thrown by Bob Feller.

A star-flagged staff car screamed into the driveway. The general erupted in a shower of molten aides. He was red in the face, as well he might be.

Allen bluntly asked, "How did that get past your radar?"

"It doesn't show on radar!" the general growled. "We're beaming it from every side, but get no image on the screen!"

"Why can't you hit it?" Allen asked.

"Because it isn't there!" roared the general. The anti-aircraft batteries stopped abruptly to reload. In the sudden pause, the general's next roar carried farther than he knew. "Anything that doesn't show on radar and can't be hit at point-blank range by massed artillery just isn't there, I tell you!"

"Then what is it that we see, general?" the President inquired, and his voice was honestly puzzled.

We whirled. He was coming out of his house in his bedroom slippers, pulling on a pair of coveralls over his pyjamas. Allen rushed at him anxiously, but the Chief shook his head. "I don't like that bomb shelter," he said. "Never been in it before. Churchill must have left this air-raid suit." He zipped it up. "May I borrow your binoculars, please, Allen?"

The Chief calmly studied the red egg in the sky. "Well, what is it?" he repeated, keeping the binoculars to his eyes.

"It's mass hysteria," the general snapped, not looking at the evidence. "An optical illusion."

The President followed the egg with the field glasses. "What do you think, Bonifield? Allen says you saw this first, and gave the alarm. Incidentally, thanks."

"I have no idea what it is, Mr. President," Ted replied. "But from watching it, I'd say the pilot knows where he is, wants to land her, and will then identify himself."

"That's the way it looks to me," said the Chief, his eyes at the binoculars.

The big egg dropped another hundred feet.

With a worried frown, the President lowered the binoculars. The morning sunlight accidentally flashed upon the polished lenses. An answering flash of light came from the object overhead. Then another, and another flash, blinking out some incomprehensible code.

"He wants to talk to us," said the President. He scratched his stubby morning chin. "General, I think we'd

better stop all this shooting. It isn't doing any good, and I'm afraid we're hurting lots of our own people. I order cease fire. Let's use our heads instead. Bring Doctor Zweistein here. He's over at the Mayflower. We were going to have breakfast together this morning."

The general barked at his aides. They scattered.

The President stepped out on the lawn in plain view. "Will somebody please hand me a mirror?" he asked.

So simple a request threw his staff into confusion—until Ted Bonifield quickly unclamped the outside rear-view mirror from the general's staff car, three steps away.

"Thanks," said the Chief.

He flashed the mirror and showed the queer craft where to land. It settled swiftly toward the White House lawn, casting a huge black shadow ahead of it like a solar eclipse. As it passed over me, I shuddered.

The general said darkly, "I predicted war would start with the President's assassination. This is suicide!"

The cease-fire order began slowly and imperfectly to take effect. It is so much easier to start a war than stop one. Gradually the air grew still and clear again. The day began to feel a little bit like Easter, in an ether dream.

The big egg, following the President's directions, came in near a corner of the White House on an open stretch of lawn between two flower beds. With growing faintness, I observed that even in the bright morning sunshine, the answering ray from overhead burned brilliantly blue white. It flashed across the lawn beside my feet. I looked down and saw a swath of green spring grass turn autumn brown, go crisp, begin to smoulder and smoke. Then the shaft of light curved back, looked at the killed grass, and softened itself to a rosy glow, as if sorry for what it had done. I rubbed my eyes. Curved light? Professor Zweistein must be inside this thing!

The President called to us, "Did anybody see what I saw?"

"Yes, sir," said the general promptly. "We could use that curved light in night fighting."

"I mean someone not subject to mass hysteria and optical illusions. Preferably a scientist. Hasn't Zweistein come yet? Then where's the old boy with the beard, the bio-something?"

"Here, sir. Yes, I saw it too. It really curved."

"How does he do it?" the general demanded.

"Well, Doctor Zweistein says all light rays curve eventually, in space time, so this may be a compression of that inherent curve—"

Ted nudged me. I shut up. Things were happening.

The big red egg was hovering ten feet off the ground at a point about one hundred feet away from us. Suddenly there was a loud click, and the thing fell suddenly to the earth with a thud that shook the White House. It must have been incredibly heavy, for the impact made a cup-shaped depression in the solid ground.

The fall seemed to kill it. It toppled over on its side and lay inert in the hollow it had made.

A second car sped up the drive behind us. "I hope that's Zweistein," said the President. "This thing must be made of something heavier than uranium."

It was not Zweistein, but the fighter pilot. Still in his flying suit, with gadgets dangling, he swaggered up the walk, a cocky little red-headed lieutenant, not a bit displeased at being rushed to the White House to report to the Commander-in-Chief. Somehow he missed seeing the general. Otherwise I'm sure he would have saluted. He shook hands with the chief, who gave him a cigarette, lit it for him, then lit one himself. They both took deep drags and stood looking at the weird red thing on the White House lawn.

The pilot said ruefully, "There's one meat ball I couldn't hit."

"You nicked him with your wing tip, didn't you?"

"Not by ten feet, Mr. President."

"Then what took your wing off, lieutenant?"

The pilot lowered his voice. "If the general hears this, he'll say I'm bucking for a psychoneurotic discharge." They moved off a few steps. "The truth is that this kingsize meat ball is surrounded by some kind of funny business, like a magnet in reverse. It bounced me off to one side. But nobody will ever believe that, and the thing's dead now, I guess."

"I believe you," said the President. "Stick around. I like the way your mind works. You're not afraid to admit that something new can happen. I have a hard time finding men like you—"

He stopped. We all stiffened. The thing had begun to tick, not like a clock, but in a curious syncopated rhythm, as if all kinds of complicated processes were going to inside at different rates of speed.

"Look out, it's going to explode!" the general shouted. He tried to throw himself between the object and the President.

The Chief steadied him and turned him around. "Take it easy, general," he suggested. "Watch what's happening!"

The big egg revived, rolled over and put down three square metal legs. They sank deep into the soil, like roots. They must have had appalling power behind them. They steadied the shell in an upright position.

A triangular porthole snapped open. The ticking stopped. The tension relaxed. Then something worse began. I had a creepy feeling that my mind was being read by an alien intelligence, aloof, inhuman, inconceivably remote from our ways of reasoning. Strange ideas flowed into my mind. . . . pictures . . . The three-cornered window closed. The feeling went away. I shrugged uneasily and called it nerves.

"Maybe we can destroy it on the ground!" the general was baying hopefully.

A third official car stopped abruptly at the gate. From the back seat of the sedan emerged the famous head of fluffy white hair. Two pillars of gold braid hustled Professor Zweistein to the President.

"This thing—" the Chief began.

Zweistein nodded eagerly. "Ja, I haff heard already on the radio. A Russian rocket." He walked out on the grass alone and looked it over shrewdly. As he passed me, I heard him chuckling. "They should live to make such a rocket," he said to himself.

The curved light ray arched out and illuminated Zweistein's hair. The scientist smiled at some abstruse private joke.

All smiles faded when an Intelligence officer raced out, white-faced, and handed the President a strip of teletype paper. When the chief read it, his face went white too. He handed it to the general, whose red face turned almost black with wrath. In sickening silence, the news was numbly passed around. What did secrecy matter now? Over Ted's shoulder I read with sinking heart:

ALL COMMUNICATIONS CUT OFF IN AND OUT OF MOSCOW. UNABLE REACH OR RECEIVE AMERICAN EMBASSY. LAST REPORT SAID HEAVY FIRING AUDIBLE, FIGHTER PLANES IN AIR. RED ARMY MOBILISING. BORDERS CLOSED. GUESS THIS IS IT.

"I knew this was it," the general rumbled. "This thing is obviously a Russian guided missile. Probably filled with germs." He coughed. "Maybe there's still time to decontaminate it. Where's that biochemist? Everybody else start running . . . I urge immediate declaration of war, Mr. President!"

Nobody moved. The President was reading the report a second time, weighing every word. Then, regretfully, he nodded to the general. "Very well. Take over. Looks like you were right from the beginning, general . . . Yes, Allen, I'm coming . . . But before I can ask Congress to de-

clare war, we ought to have legal proof of where this missile came from."

"Where else could it come from?" the general glowed. "Anything that isn't ours is theirs."

Professor Zweistein said mildly. "Excuse me, please, but do you not see the identifying symbol plainly painted on the shell?"

"We've all been looking at it," said the Chief, "but nobody knows what it means."

Suddenly it came back to me, that meaning. The book had not been about astrology, but astronomy. I drew a breath to shout the answer, and missed by one second my chance to shine.

For Zweistein was replying calmly, "That is the astronomic symbol for the planet Mars."

The general said a short, bad word.

The President made a wry face and said, "If this is a publicity stunt, somebody is going to a Federal prison! The planet Mars, in a pig's eye!"

The angry disbelief which greeted Doctor Zweistein's simple statement of fact was further aggravated by the sudden arrival of the Secretary of State. He is a hardheaded man, and he will not let his country be pushed around. His face looked like a granite mountain in a thunderstorm.

He announced, "Mr. President, our ambassador at Moscow is incommunicado. That is tantamount to war. I have taken identical measures against the Soviet ambassador here. He threatens to break relations. What are your wishes?"

"I wish everybody would keep his shirt on," said the President. "Look, this thing is listening to everything we say."

I gaped. The huge egg had put out a strange instrument, unlike any earthly device, but betraying its function by turning with the awful mechanical interest of an aircraft sound detector. It centred on the vibrations of our speech. We all backed fearfully away.

An Under Secretary of State had been struggling through the crowd to

the Secretary. Now, at last, he overtook him with a new message. It was from the American ambassador at Moscow. The President and the Secretary of State scanned it together and exchanged startled looks.

"Read it out loud," said the Chief. "This is no time for pussyfooting. Every minute counts."

In a strained voice, the Secretary of State read, "The Soviet Government demands immediate withdrawal of an alleged American guided missile, believed to contain an atomic bomb, which fell inside the Kremlin early this morning despite violent defense measures. Moscow is under martial law. The Kremlin is evacuated. All U.S. citizens not diplomatically immune have been taken hostage and chained near the alleged bomb. Only an immediate denial with proof can avert war. The Russians say the bomb is painted with a Fascist symbol."

"Round up the Russians!" the general promptly ordered.

"Now hold on," said the President, coming back. "I've changed my mind, general. Don't round up anybody. You're not taking over. I'm staying right here, where I belong." He was beginning to look as he used to during his campaign, smiling dryly through clenched teeth, balanced like a boxer in the ring, trading punches in plain words with all comers. He instructed his Secretary of State, "Unfreeze the Soviet ambassador. Cable the Russian President that the thing under his window isn't ours. Tell him I've got one under my window too. Rush radio photos of this one to Moscow to prove it . . . General, let's hold up that declaration of war until we find out where both of these things come from!"

He went to Zweistein, who was swiftly making sketches and calculations on a pad. "Now, professor, how do we talk to it?"

"I don't know," said Zweistein, "but I think he does. He's come prepared. He didn't land here by accident."

In our excitement, we had turned our backs upon the thing from nowhere. Now we looked again, and there was Bette Pringle. She whisked around a corner of the White House and was in front of the big red thing before she saw it. The searching ray spotlighted her face and blinded her. She stood frozen with terror. The triangular porthole opened, and a metal hook, like a giant claw, snaked around Bette's waist and drew her toward the hull, where a small door was opening to receive her.

Trying to hold herself back, Bette clutched desperately at the only handhold she could find, a flowering shrub that had just burst into bloom that morning. She tore away an armload of its fragrant blossoms and she was pulled along.

Ted lunged forward. By now, stunned spectators were recovering their wits. Several men shouted and began to run toward Bette, after Ted. On the White House roof, one of Bette's favourite guards blew his top, aimed his Tommy-gun and emptied it straight at the open porthole. The bullets glanced off in a graceful curve. Bette was inside the crystal bubble of impenetrable force.

The hook drew Bette up against the open door. She braced her feet against the final step inside, shielding her face from the horror of the great red monster by lifting the armful of flowers she was still clutching as if they were her last hold on life. Her handbag, swinging on a shoulder strap, dropped open. The pulling stopped. The pitiless light ray shifted from Bette's face to the flowers she held, and inspected them with a strange impersonal interest. Then the hook let Bette go, and took the flowers in through the door instead of the girl.

Free from the mechanical embrace, Bette began to back away. Ted was some ten feet from her, running hard, when he recoiled as if he had hit a rubber wall. He bounced off to one side and fell. Rolling up on to his feet again like a football player, he charged once more, and hammered

at the armoured air that kept him from the girl he loved.

Bette crept backward almost to where Ted stood, outside the dome of force, smashing his fists against thin air. When she had only one more step to go to safety, the frightful book shot out at her, dropped something round into her bag, and folded back inside the hull without touching her.

Bette took one last step backward through the unseen wall and crumpled. Ted caught her as she fell, and carried her back to where we stood.

Her eyelids fluttered. "Put me down," she whispered. "I only fainted."

Ted put her down in the shade and knelt beside her anxiously. Something fell out of her dangling open bag. It flashed fire and rolled. Zweistein picked it up.

"Probably radioactive," the general gritted.

"Then so are you," said Zweistein, holding it with both hands, cradling it in wonder.

We examined the object with murmurs of amazement. The creature had given Bette a flawless blue-white diamond as big as a grapefruit. Inside the huge jewel, embedded by some miraculous art, was a cluster of nine other gems, some large, some very small, spaced about a golden core. Each man saw his birthstone there. Awed voices said, "An emerald. A pearl. A ruby. A star sapphire with rings of amethyst."

Zweistein held the treasure up for everyone to see. "Of course you all recognise this," he said with a courteous nod to the mystified general. "It is a model of our solar system. Each jewel symbolises a planet, and the golden core our sun. Its purpose is to prove—"

As Zweistein spoke, the listening device centred on his voice. Suddenly the curved light ray lashed out and narrowed down to pin-point focus on the model in his hand. It pointed out the fourth jewel from the sun, the ruby, closest neighbour to the

larger pearl of Terra. It lighted up the blood-red jewel of Mars.

"Thank you," said Zweistein calmly to the listening mechanical ear. "We understand. You are from the planet Mars. I cannot say that you are entirely unexpected."

The general scoffed, "No life on Mars. Subject is closed."

"In science," said Zweistein mildly, "no subject is ever closed. Only minds."

The Secretary of State returned with a new message from the American Ambassador at Moscow. The President immediately released it to the Press. It said:

All U.S. citizens freed with full apologies. The Politburo have returned to the Kremlin. Soviet scientists are being hastily summoned. War danger appears to have abated, but situation far from clear.

The situation was not clear in Washington, either. Crowds were gathering in the streets, beyond the cordon of marines. The White House Press secretary brought word that the news-reel and television companies were indignant at being kept away, if it really was a man from Mars, or even if it wasn't.

"Let them all in," the Chief ordered. "I want the whole country to see this thing, and spike that Russian-rocket scare."

In five minutes the lawn was swarming with cameramen. Some of them were grinning. "What a screwy gag for a Monday story," said one. They lost their grins when they smashed their noses on the invisible barrier, 10 feet from the shell. Even the most sceptical reporter knew then that we were up against something new.

The awful hook swung out, snatched a camera from one of the men and whisked it in through the little door. The photographer shouted. The crowd fell back to a safer distance. Whatever was inside the shell seemed to be collecting specimens.

In a moment the claw shot out again and tossed the astonished photographer the largest emerald anyone had ever seen. This was later placed

in the Smithsonian Institution, but not without a struggle. We began to understand that our strange, inhuman visitor had an ethical mind. He did not take without giving in return.

Zweistein said impatiently, "I hope he does not go away before we learn from him. He has much to teach us."

"Or teach the Russians," the general grated. We could see that he was thinking about the other Martian inside the red Kremlin walls being studied by Soviet scientists in haste and secrecy. He pointed to the milling crowd and said ominously, "Not one of them has penetrated his defences, except that little girl. I wonder how she did it? We're going to need her very badly, I'm afraid. Where is she?"

Ted Bonifield stepped up, smiling. "She's right here, and feeling fine."

The general swung on her eagerly. "How did you get through that air armour?"

Reporters crowded around to listen.

"Isn't that restricted information, general?" Bette asked coolly. "Whoever gets this secret first could have things his own way, here on earth." She was pale and grave. Her eyes were strangely bright.

"She's right," said the Chief. He ordered the grounds cleared and guards posted. Folding tables were placed on the grass. We sat down to try to understand the man from Mars. The general repeated his urgent question to Bette.

She said, "He let me in, deliberately. He can turn his air armour on and off like a light."

One of the general's aides interrupted with a report, "Our radar beams are being deflected without sending back an echo."

The general nodded grimly. "That makes it a doubly decisive weapon. . . . Please go on, Miss Pringle. Did he turn it off a second time, to let you out?"

"No, it's different from the inside. It lets you out."

Ted said, "Yes, I was pushing with all my strength to get in, when she

stepped out beside me with no effort."

The general looked portentously upon us. "This means our planes, tanks and battleships could fire at will and not be hit. One such bomber could dominate a country. A dozen could police the world. In war, no enemy would stand a chance."

"You mean there'd be no more war," the President declared. "Whoever gets this first, gets peace on his terms for keeps. The Russians are realists. So are we. We would have to come to terms and disarm, because armaments would be useless against this new weapon." He turped and looked at the monstrous thing squatting on the grass, listening intently to all we said. "I wish there was some way of knowing what you're thinking about," he said simply to the man from Mars.

As if in answer, the door opened and the light ray shone on Bette's face. Then bending like a bow, the beam of curved light beckoned for her to come inside the spaceship.

Bette slowly arose, a new dignity about her. She began to powder her nose carefully, making an artistic job of it.

Ted drew her aside and spoke quietly, "You're not going near that thing. It tried to eat you."

"Isn't that what you're always threatening to do?" she whispered. She gave him a tense, pale smile and turned quickly to Professor Zweistein. "I caught a glimpse of something alive inside, about the size of a man, sitting at controls. He tried to talk to me."

"I didn't hear him say anything," said Ted.

"Neither did I," said Bette, puzzled. "He seemed to speak inside my mind, not with words but with ideas." She closed her eyes and sighed. "With pictures too," she whispered, reminiscent. "Pictures no artist could paint."

With an expression that hovered between an uneasy smile and a worried frown, the President asked Bette, "What kind of ideas has the man from Mars been putting into your head, Miss Pringle?"

"Oh, I was too frightened to—to

take dictation properly. It was something about a white hat, a brother, and feeling thirsty."

The general swung off with an impatient snort. "Take her away, Bonifield. She's had a serious shock and doesn't know what she's saying. Operation Mars is now a military matter." He ordered an aide, "Move the entire Communications Section of the War Department here on the double double. We've got to find a way of negotiating with this potential ally before the Russians beat us to it!"

The words were not out of his mouth before the claw oozed out, immensely long, and placed an amazing device upon our table. It looked like nothing on Earth. The closest I can come to helping you see it is to say it was an intricately worked platinum bowl with two long crystal fronds like ferns growing the wrong way out of the bottom. Except that it wasn't a bowl, they weren't ferns, and none of us knew what to make of it.

Bette came up behind us and clapped her hands. "That's the white hat he promised me," she said, and reached for it.

"Be careful!" Ted implored her.

"I've promised you I would be. Now let's not say 'careful' any more." She picked up the platinum-and-crystal creation. It looked a little like a hat, the way she held it. "How cute," she said.

"I said take the girl away," the general ordered gruffly. "She's hysterical."

Ted tried to lead Bette away, but the thing inside the spaceship had other ideas. With appalling agility the flexible claw stabbed in among us and placed the fanciful helmet on Bette's head. The two feathery crystal plumes stood up from her small pert head like the antenna on a beautiful rare butterfly.

As though hypnotised, she sank into the vacant chair beside Zweistein. "Oh, my goodness!" she said presently to herself. "This beats anything I've ever felt." She reached for Zweistein's pencils and began automatically to write.

"It beats me," said the general sourly. . . . "Mr. President, we have no time to waste on foolishness—"

"Sh-h! She's writing."

Bette wrote four words in shorthand.

Then she sat listening, entranced. "Read it, somebody!" the President demanded. In chagrin, we all shook our expensive heads. The shorthand of our underpaid secretaries was more mysterious to us than the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians.

"You, Bonifield? Your quotes of what I say are always right."

Ted swallowed hard. "I can read hers," he said. His worried eyes were fixed on her closed lids. He forced himself to look at the four words she had written.

In a choking voice, he read aloud, "I . . . come . . . in . . . peace."

We all looked quickly at the Martian.

The President stepped out in front of us and gravely spoke into the sound detector, "We welcome you in peace. Is there anything you need?"

Bette's nimble pencil took down the unheard reply, and Ted translated, "Badly need oxygen, water, earth, solar energy."

The Chief passed that one to Zweistein, who promptly said into the Martian's hearing aid, "The air around you is twenty-one per cent. oxygen. Can you breathe it or do you need pure oxygen in a cylinder?"

The general watched suspiciously as the reply came back through our rival Communications Section: "Can extract oxygen from your air, but what do you want in return?"

"Help yourself," the Chief said quickly. "Free air."

With a hiss, a ventilator opened. The unseen man from Mars took grateful gasps of our fresh air, fragrant with the scent of Easter flowers. I caught myself drawing a deep breath in sympathy. I hadn't realised how very sweet our Earth's free air could be.

Bette printed in capital letters: "THANK YOU."

The President bent down beside her. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She scribbled on the margin of her pad, "I'm O.K., thanks. He thinks he's thirsty."

"Thirsty, is he?" The Chief reached down and turned on the lawn sprinkler. Cool water fountained on the grass. The Martian's light ray struck it, made it scintillate.

Bette recorded what was in his mind:

"Will give you a diamond for every drop that you will give me to drink."

"Take all you want," said the President. "We have oceans." His eyes were beginning to glow with understanding of the kind of creature we had on our hands.

A drinking tube uncoiled like the proboscis of a giant bee. The traveler from an arid planet where it never rains drank thirstily of the Earth's pure water.

"Enjoy our sunshine, too," the Chief said hospitably, edging closer to the Martian all the time.

We sensed deep earnestness beneath his simple words and casual manner. More than any of the rest of us, the Chief knew what he was doing. But then, think how much experience an accessible President acquires in sizing strangers up and handling outlandish callers who make weird demands. The Martian's needs were comparatively simple.

An odd five-sided window popped open on the space ship's southern exposure. The blessed Easter sun streamed in like benediction upon the inhabitant of a have-not planet whose warmest summer noon would seem a wintry twilight to us, who had the good luck to be born on sunny Terra.

The President went on, smiling. "You wanted earth, you say? Take on a load of dirt. This place belongs to the people of the country and I don't think they'll mind. Come, help yourself. We've got plenty of everything here."

A hand-shaped scoop dropped out and spaded up a little of the White House lawn. The Martian fondled the rich southern soil like a miser gloating over gold. He let our good earth trickle through his metal fingers,

musings: "Beautiful, wonderful Terra. The Garden of Eden of our solar system. We on Mars have nothing valuable enough to repay you for these rare elements you are giving me."

"Oh, yes, you have!" the general boomed heartily, and for the first time I saw him smile. "Just tell us how you make that air armour that surrounds you, and in exchange we will present you with all the oxygen and earth and water you can take aboard." It sounded like a bargain, the way he put it. "And blue sky, too," he generously added.

We waited tensely while Bette's darting pencil recorded the Martian's reply: "I am willing, but my brother says to wait for a better offer."

Zweinstein asked, "Is he there with you?"

"No, he is over on the opposite side of your planet, studying that other kind of man. There appear to be two local species."

"You are in communication with him?" the President queried.

"Yes, constantly. We are all one mind."

"Then what is he doing in Moscow?" the general shot back.

There came a painful pause. Bette tried very hard to put into shorthand English ideas that were entering her mind, but she could not find the words. Her pencil faltered, crossed out, stopped. Abruptly she tore off the helmet and covered her face with her hands. Ted put his arm protectively around her shoulders.

"I can't," she said.

"Can't what?" the general snapped.

"Can't take his dictation any more. He's sending pictures now. They're like picture post cards of some foreign place I've never seen. Church domes like purple onions. Foreign-looking people are walking around. Oh, I can't describe the scene I see. I wish I could." She began to cry a little. Then all at once she brightened and began to laugh. "My paints!" she cried. "Ted, run up to my office and bring me down my

water colours. They're in the bottom drawer."

Ted was back in a moment, and Bette began to splash down shapes and colours with her clever brush. "This doesn't make any sense," she apologised, painting very rapidly, "but it's what he makes me see in my mind's eye."

As the scene took shape on paper, the general turned a richer purple than any of the church domes. "You can't imagine how much sense you're making, child!" he trumpeted. "Wait till Intelligence sees this! You are painting a picture of the hidden inner courtyard of the Kremlin at Moscow. No foreigner has seen it since the Bolsheviks took over."

Surrounded by men with scientific instruments, the Russian President faced an egg-shaped spaceship identical to ours, painted with the same symbol. The Russians were giving their visitor the works. There were tables of fruit and flowers, and fountains playing in the old palace courtyard of the Czars of Muscovy.

Bette became her own commentator and critic as she swiftly sketched. "This round thing—I can't draw a circle—is supposed to be a big globe of the world. The Russians are marking it up with red crayon, like this." Bette carved it like a melon. "So much for you, so much for us, they're saying. Now they are offering him—I can't get the Russian words, but I get the general idea, here on the map—offering all the water in the Volga River, all the black earth of the Ukraine, all the fruits and flowers of the Caucasus, all the winds of Siberia and the sunshine of Turkestan, if the men from Mars will agree to establish their proposed colony on Soviet soil."

"Colony!" the general groaned. "I knew they wanted something from us! Everybody else does!"

Bette dropped her paints and grabbed her notebook, for the Martian had heard what the general said. She wrote, and Ted deciphered, "Yes. We have come to buy a place in the sun. Our ancient race is dying

for lack of the four priceless elements you have here in such abundance. Only one hundred of us are left alive. We will give you anything you want in exchange for a refuge in this Promised Land. If you refuse, we shall destroy you."

The President took it in his stride, "You can have your pick of Government land in any state you choose. But why is your brother bargaining with the Russians at the same time you are negotiating with us?"

"We are making an impartial survey," said the man from Mars. "We will take the better of two offers. Between us, we decide for all our race."

"And if you disagree?"

"For ten thousand years no one has disagreed on Mars. . . . Wait. Something is wrong. I can feel my brother being tempted. He disagrees with me."

"In that case," said the President, "let me recommend to both of you a fifth essential element of life, which he has overlooked. Its name is freedom. We can promise it to you. They can't."

"What difference does it make?" the Martian wondered. "Free or not free, one still breathes, eats, drinks, feels the sun."

"It makes all the difference in the world," the Chief persisted. "Without our precious element of liberty, you could not freely breathe our fine fresh air you love. You could not own an acre of the earth that grows these flowers, or claim its fruits. You would not be free to think your own thoughts or practice your beliefs, whatever they may be. Without our priceless element of liberty, I warn you, the good things of this Earth are not worth having because they cannot be enjoyed."

The Martian grew troubled. He shifted uneasily on his moorings. "But this is what those other men are promising my brother. They say you have no freedom here; they claim to have it all. They tell him, 'Pick the winning side. We have more land, more people' . . . Now he has agreed. Brother is too easily in-

fluenced, I fear. He warns me to escape from you and fly over where he is on the free side of the Globe. Wait. . . . What is this? The other species of man across the earth from you has made brother and me a more attractive offer. They promise us one million human beings, men and women, to do with as we please. We knew we would need helpers in our colony, but to do with as we please—This new concept could be interesting. We had forgotten it was possible. How many bodies do you bid?"

"Not one," replied the President.

"Why not? You have so many. Surely you could spare a few. Some specimens are more beautiful than your flowers." The light ray gleamed at Bette, but she was absorbed in taking shorthand swiftly, and did not look up.

She wrote one more line of shorthand. Ted looked at it and his face grew hard. He did not read it aloud. He looked up at the mighty Martian machine defiantly and said, "No."

Bette wrote again, apparently quite unconcerned. This time Ted translated. "Will gladly exchange the formula you want for this prime specimen of young female of your species . . . You do not trust me? Martians never lie. Here is the formula in advance."

Zweistein leaned forward tensely as Bette began to write slowly and carefully. She seemed to photograph symbols in her mind and then draw what she saw. Ted bent down beside her, watching, but he did not read.

At length he straightened up and said, "This isn't shorthand that she's writing. It's all Greek to me."

I looked over her shoulder. It was mostly Greek, with Arabic and Roman numerals, the polyglot of higher mathematics. Ted tore the pages out of Bette's notebook and handed them to Zweistein. Bette took off the platinum-and-crystal helmet. "No signal," she said wearily. "The line is dead." She put down her pencil and stretched her cramped fingers. She laid her head back on Ted's shoulder and closed her eyes. Ted

held her close, as if to shield her from some nameless danger.

The father of modern physics read the Martian formula and shrugged. He sank down in his chair, looking old and tired, and yet very much at peace, as if he had reached a journey's end. "Well, this is what we've hoped for, that final and harmless weapon of total defense that is man's only guarantee of lasting peace. With this secret, war becomes a military impossibility."

"How soon can you build it?" the general demanded.

"About as soon as the Russian physicists can build an atomic bomb by reading the formula 'E equals mc square.'"

"Meaning never," said the President.

"That's right," said Zweistein. "This formula is useless, until we have one of the Martian machines to take apart and study."

Bette opened her eyes, and they were very bright. She said shyly, "Our friend has one of those machines inside his spaceship a few steps from where we're sitting." She stood up and checked her lipstick in her pocket mirror. Her lips were very red against the whiteness of her cheeks. The ray of light streamed out from the big shell and looked her up and down.

"Where do you think you're going?" Ted asked.

He did not get a direct answer. Instead she said, "Well, hasn't he already offered to give us anything we want?"

Ted seized her hand and held it tightly. "How do you know what kind of thing may be in there?"

"He's nothing I'm afraid of now," she said, suppressing a faint smile. "After all, remember this: I can read his mind." She walked over and stood in front of the President with her hands folded like a schoolgirl. "He's already invited me to come in," she said. "I didn't write that down."

"I wish you wouldn't," said the Chief. "What if he took off for Mars with you inside?"

She said, "Eventually we all take off for somewhere."

She turned to the general for support. His purple face went ashen grey. "You said this was a military matter," she reminded him. "I hereby volunteer for Military Intelligence." She waited. "Orders, sir?"

"Do what you can," the general said weakly. "Take no unnecessary risks. Er—let's see. You have a pocket mirror. Flash it from a porthole every minute on the dot. If you don't keep signalling that you're all right, we're coming in and get you. God bless you, child. Got a watch?"

"I've got everything I need," she said, and started off across the grass. "I'll find out what makes him tick."

Ted stopped her a few feet from where he stood. He swung her around so that her back was to the Martian.

"Please let me go," she begged. "Can't you see I'm the only one small enough to get in through that little door?"

He released her wrists and tried to plead with her. They were facing each other about a foot apart. When he reached up to take her by her shoulders and shake some sense into her, his hands could not go through the air. The invisible air armour had silently and stealthily been extended. It dropped between them like a pane of glass. He grappled at the empty air, like a man fighting with a phantom.

Bette walked to the spaceship and knocked politely on the door. Eagerly assisted by the claw, she stepped inside. The door clamped shut.

The general took out his watch and laid it on the table. The second hand seemed to be engraved upon the dial. Finally it crawled a little. So did my skin. A minute passed. Bette's pocket mirror flashed cheerily from a porthole. We dimly saw her face inside, veiled as though in cellophane. Then she disappeared.

A minute and a half later, we saw her hand hold up the mirror and flash it briefly, once; but this time her face did not appear. Two minutes and thirteen seconds later, no third signal flash had yet been seen. We looked at one another like murderers. The red shell began to tick in a strange new way.

Tick-tock, tick-tock. Another minute passed.

"Let's go get her," said Ted dully. "I don't care what happens to me now."

He and the general advanced across the lawn like a suicide mission.

Suddenly the ticking stopped. The ventilator hissed.

"The air armour is gone!" Zweistein cried, pointing. In the ghastly stillness of that wait, a sparrow had hopped across the invisible boundary line, pecking at the grass.

Ted and the general flung themselves ahead. Before they reached the spaceship's hull, the panel opened, and Bette stepped out backwards, waving good-bye. She moved slowly, carrying something big and round, rather like a plastic beach ball. We could not see what it was she had obtained. All we looked at was her smile . . . and what a mysterious little smile it was. I wish Leonardo da Vinci had been there. He could have brushed up his famous Mona Lisa, with Bette for his model.

Ted held out his arms to her, speechless with relief. She put the shining globe into his arms, instead of herself, and passed him by. She walked straight past us all, without a word, but with that tantalising little smile. Everything that girls since Eve have ever known was there on her curving lips. She yawned and stretched luxuriously, and went into the house.

Ted came toward us slowly, like a sleepwalker, holding the big round bubble in his arms. Zweistein reached out and touched the pinkish globe. It burst like a soap bubble, and there stood a most magnificent machine. We stared at it as cave-men might gape stupidly at the inside of a radio set. Delicate and light, it was about the size of a basketball. The surface was a sphere of wires woven in open mesh that let us look inside. The interior was mostly empty space, but here and there were little round things like marbles, of some unknown substance, spaced on shining rings of strange alloys that

circled and crossed like intersecting orbits. At the centre was a core of baffling complexity. Disconnected from its source of power, the instrument was motionless and dead, but even my unpracticed eye could see that the machine was built to be a mass of moving parts, interacting with exquisite precision.

"Well, Military Intelligence got you your model," the general told Zweistein. "How soon can you have it in mass-production?"

"We shall do our best. We didn't let you down on that other job, did we? Please send your fastest planes for Berkley, Jameson, Capri—"

"They should be here now," said the Chief. "I phoned the council to assemble while I was cooling my heels in that bomb shelter this morning."

"Ach, good! And we shall need a workshop—"

"Use the Oval Room. Let's not get spread out all over town. Things may happen quickly now." The Chief's voice was gruff.

Zweistein examined the air-armour device closely, turning it around and around in his hands. An official car roared into the driveway and some billions of dollars' worth of scientific brains got out—Berkley, Capri, and Jameson.

The President met them and explained the situation. Zweistein joined them, carrying the model, and they all went inside. The general brought up the rear. I sat down and looked at the Martian. He was thinking hard, and so was I. Ted sat down beside me and lit a cigarette.

Not looking at him, I said, pointing to the motionless Martian, "He and his brother are still trying to decide the future of the human species. I'd give anything to listen in on their thought waves."

"I wouldn't," said Ted. He flipped his half-smoked cigarette away. "I'm not interested in said species any more."

"Hello," said a little voice behind us. Bette was standing there.

Ted stood up and held a chair for

her respectfully. "Is there anything I can get for you?" he inquired.

"You might give me a little smile," she said.

"I'll do anything in this world for you but that," he said.

"Hello," I croaked, looking very hard at her. She seemed about the same. She looked all right. Quite all right. In fact, I had not noticed before how completely all right a girl can look.

After a while, she said, "Ted, don't look at me like that. Right inside the door, I stepped into a big plastic bubble he had ready for me. He kept me in it all the time, like a goldfish in a bowl."

We began to relax. Ted asked, "Why doesn't he come out of his shell where all of us can see him?"

She said sweetly, "He asked me to offer his regrets. He says he isn't properly attired for a public appearance. He says to tell you that next trip he'll know what to bring."

"Excuse me," I said. "I must take testimony which may change the entire science of biology. . . . Miss Pringle, please describe the Martian."

A knot of curious aides and guards clustered around us, listening. Bette looked thoughtfully from man to man, with a faraway look in her eyes, and said, "Well, all I can say is, he's not the least bit like any of you. He's most unusual."

The general emerged from the White House. His cheeks were burning. "Can you imagine that?" he grumbled as he approached. "They asked me to leave. Said my questions bothered them." Then he saw Bette and gave what is known technically as "a double take." He looked, and he looked again. "Hrmp!" he said. "You. Well, which side is the meat ball—br-r—I mean the Martian—going to be on? Ours or theirs?"

"We didn't talk politics," she said demurely.

The general smote his brow and sank down in a chair.

"I think you'd better go and rest,

dear," said Ted. "You're all confused."

"Not any more," she said, very seriously. "I used to be confused sometimes, before to-day. But that's all over now. I know exactly what I want."

"A most unusual Martian, improperly attired?"

"Not on a bet," she said. "I want to live in a small town in the United States of America, planet Earth, right now, married to a prime specimen of homo sapiens named Mr. Bonifield." She squeezed his arm. "Why, Ted, you're human!" she exclaimed. She made it sound like a scientific discovery of the first magnitude.

The President came out and joined us. At the sight of him, the Martian flashed his blinding light ray and waved the hook in a disturbing way. Bette put on her thinking cap and began to take dictation. Ted stood by her and read her shorthand aloud to us.

There was turmoil in the Martian's mind: "That other species of man has convinced my brother that this planet cannot long endure half slave, half free," he reported.

The President walked up to the defenceless eggshell and put his hand on it in a friendly gesture. "Listen. Those words were spoken by an American President many years ago. Those other men had no right to say them to your brother. They mean the opposite of what he thinks they mean. You tell him to fly over here to us where it is free, while he still can, as so many of their people try to do."

We moved our chairs and tables closer. I touched the spaceship. It was not like any metal I had ever felt. It was somehow alive, like human skin. I could feel it growing warm and warmer.

A breathless runner brought a Tass release, hot off the wire:

An exclusive treaty of colonisation and mutual aid between the U.S.S.R. and Mars has just been signed in the Kremlin by Comrade 2, the sole official envoy of the

Red Planet. The working model of a military invention of decisive value has been given to Soviet scientists as proof of good faith. Comrade 2 denounces the renegade Martian, falsely claiming to be his brother, who is now being held captive by the F.B.I. in Washington and may be forced to sign anything.

In the midst of our consternation Bette tugged at Ted's sleeve. The Chief held up his hand for silence. The Martian was wishing: "Would someone please read aloud the thoughts written on the paper? I cannot read it from in here."

The President read the Tass statement to the man from Mars in a cold and scornful voice.

Things began to hum. Slowly the Martian monster rose out of the earth on his mighty metal legs. In thought waves so violent that Bette winced with pain, the Martian conveyed: "This is the first time one Martian has deceived another. My brother did not tell me any of this that he has said and done. Now I grow very angry." A heavy clanking of machinery began. We smelled ozone.

The President tried to hold him back, but it was like trying to restrain a battleship. "Don't blame your brother!" he called up to the rising shape. "It may not be he who is deceiving you and us. Here on Earth you mustn't believe everything that's printed. Can't you read his mind and learn the truth?"

"The truth is that my brother has shut me from his mind and heart. To Martians, that is the final insult!" The clanking changed to a wild moaning, dreadful as a giant's funeral dirge. "Now I do the same to him. I shut my brother from my mind, my heart."

With terrifying power, the huge legs rose up and up like trees. The ground trembled like an earthquake. With scorching brilliance a great light began to swing its searing ray from side to side. The crowds in the streets fell back and began to run. Marines and soldiers and White House guards

shielded their faces with their arms as the fearsome beam passed over them.

At treetop beight the Martian stood, looked down upon us in awful majesty and left us with this thought: "Your good green Earth must be united before it is fit for men or Martians to inhabit. My brother has challenged me to a duel to the death. The winner will return with a hundred ships to enforce peace on Earth forevermore, for the side that he has chosen. I chose liberty. Farewell. I shall return!"

Bette sprang up and screamed. Her voice was drowned in a horrible roar. A torrent of blue flame crashed down, and the spaceship shot into the sky. Blasted earth and smoking sod were flung into our faces, and many of us fell, from the concussion and from fright. Dazed and half blinded by the flash, we stumbled to our feet and watched it go.

Zweistein and his colleagues hurried outdoors just in time to see the spaceship vanishing over Baltimore. We stood helplessly on the scorched earth between the burned flower beds. It became surprisingly quiet.

"Let's all go inside now," the President said in a loud, clear voice. "We must stay near our communications."

We trooped solemnly inside, still shaken, and sat in the room where the Supreme Scientific Council meets.

The President's face was deeply lined by the strain he had been under for many hours. He looked around at the scientists and said, "I realise that you have had only a very short time in which to examine the model we obtained, but I was hoping that perhaps—no, that's impossible, of course, I apologise."

Doctor Berkley reported crisply, in his nasal New England twang, "We took it apart. It wasn't hard. We have done it before. You see, the Martian machine is a working model of a uranium atom, magnified some billion, billion times. The synthetic atom is the ultimate in physics. When you have that, you have everything."

"How soon will we have it?" the general demanded.

"In three or four years, if we drop everything else, we can probably build you a duplicate. But it won't work, because we do not know its source of power. Its circuits all terminate in a heavy cable that was plugged in somewhere else. Until they show us how to build that unknown power source, the machine is merely a beautiful toy. We have a strong suspicion it harnesses the cosmic rays, of which we know practically nothing. But it's a magnificent job of engineering, that synthetic atom. It's going to be a privilege to work with those brains when they come back."

"Come back where?" the general said gloomily. "To Washington or Moscow?"

"Moscow is on the wire, Mr. President," said the radio-phone operator.

Our ambassador said in his soft Southern voice, "Well, that thing is gone. It shot up out of the Kremlin across the street from us a few minutes ago in a cloud of fire. It left Moscow headed due east, and was last reported over Lake Baikal, in Siberia."

"Yes, ours is gone too," said the President.

The faraway voice hesitated. "Mr. President, were those things really from Mars or is all this some kind of horrible joke?"

"I wish it were a joke," said the Chief. "I'd feel better than I do now. Thanks for calling. Good-by."

Then came a radio monitor's "catch" of a badly garbled broadcast in Russian from Radio Moscow. We translated the audible phrases:

"Mighty Red Sphere risen over Red Square . . . defense from unprovoked treacherous attack . . . craven lackey traitor Martian, victim of lying war-mongering propaganda . . ."

At this point we gave up trying to make sense out of it.

At five P.M. our Martian was sighted over Philadelphia. Two minutes

later he passed Denver, narrowly missing Pikes Peak in his haste.

At 5:03, Martian No. 2 was reported "crossing Japan at a speed estimated to be in excess of one thousand miles a minute, soon disappearing over the Pacific."

At the same minute, Martian No. 1 streaked over Santa Barbara and lost itself against the sun.

For five minutes there was no news. A watching world held its breath. All stations were on the air, but silent. Sometimes you could hear excited announcers breathing heavily as they clutched their microphones and waited for the next news flash.

At 5:06 they all spoke in unison, a Greek chorus chanting a global tragedy:

"From Honolulu comes this report: The Martian spaceships have sighted each other over the Hawaiian Islands. Sounds like human cries are coming from the sky. People are fleeing from their homes and running wildly in all directions. Sparing and fainting like boxers, the huge aircraft moved eastward wrapped in sheets of violet flames."

They joined battle over San Francisco at 5:09. Thousands of eye witnesses have described it as the most awe-inspiring spectacle that the eyes of mortal men have ever beheld. It was as if all the fireworks in hell had been flung into heaven.

It was impossible to determine then or now which Martian was which or who was winning. Stripped of their magic armor by man's craft and woman's guile, the brothers lashed savagely at each other with whips of blazing solar energy.

At 5.15, they began to spin together in a fiery dance of death at a point thirty-five miles northeast of Columbus, Ohio, in Delaware county, near the town of Ashley. The two Martians flung themselves headlong against each other at supersonic speed, in a two-way suicide crash. The explosion in the sky has been likened to a volcanic eruption, to Krakatao, to Hiroshima. It rattled windows from Cleveland to Cincinnati. The

dazzling flash of crimson light was visible from Indianapolis to Pittsburgh.

Then, with an ear-splitting racket, one Martian spaceship fell slowly to the Earth, streaming fire. Eyewitnesses stated that it was entirely consumed by flames before it reached the ground. No remains were ever found.

The winning Martian, whoever he was, was completely unharmed. Either to show us he was safe or as a gesture of hostility, he flew completely around America, humming triumphantly, and then took off for home.

He soared into space as the sun went down, and on the horizon a red planet rose. Whether he was Mr. 1 or Comrade 2, he was last seen by the Mount Palomar telescope leaving the Earth's gravitational field at meteoric speed.

And that's that. For a while . . .

Now the sixty-four rouble question is: Which Martian got away? The general asks it in his sleep, and the Russian President is reported to be spending most of his time looking through the right end of a telescope at Mars, instead of through the wrong end of his telescope at Terra, not so firma. The Politburo is busy trying to decide whether the Martian Soviet—in case they should be needing one—should be placed at Omsk, or Tomsk, or Minsk, or Pinsk, thus giving themselves a splitting headache, for a change.

The general proposed establishing a military guard over Bette Pringle, because of her potential value, should the Martians be on our side when they come back.

She smiled and shook her head. "Where I'm going to live now, it's safe."

"A small town, married to an editor?" I hazarded.

She nodded proudly. "I went and looked at it. Our country home has fresh air and sunshine, a flowing brook, and the good green earth around. What's good enough for Martians is good enough for me. What more does anybody really want? Good-by, Doc."

She didn't seem to be worrying about which Martian got away. I wonder if that little girl knows more than she's telling? I don't suppose that men will ever know what goes on in women's minds, any more than we know what really happened inside that spaceship. Perhaps they are all in telepathic communion with those unusual men from Mars. Maybe that's what girls are thinking about when they get that faraway starry look in their eyes.

If Bette had a secret, she's keeping it to herself . . . until Mars swings around its orbit and approaches our earth again. It's then that they will step across. Planetariums are more crowded than the bars these days. Astronomers are busy showing people how our two planets pass each other like great ships circling on the clear high seas of space. Ships than can and will exchange passengers . . .

It won't be long now.

THE END

DWELLERS' IN SILENCE

By RAY BRADBURY

They died on Mars in 1997. But who met the Earth expedition in 2017?

WHEN the wind came through the sky, he and his small family would sit in the stone hut and warm their hands over a small fire. The wind would stir the canal waters and almost blow the stars out of the sky, but Mr. Hathaway would sit contented and talk to his wife and his wife would talk back, and he would talk to his two daughters and his son about the old days on Earth, and they would all reply neatly.

It was the twentieth year after the Great War. Mars was a tomb planet. Whether or not Earth was the same was a matter for much silent debate for himself, or his family, on the long Martian nights. Then the dust storms came over the low hexagonal tomb buildings, whining past the great ancient gargoyles on the iron mountains,

blowing between the last standing pillars of an old city, and tearing away the plastic walls of a newer, American-built city that was melting away into the sand, desolated.

Hathaway rose from the family circle from time to time and went out into the suddenly clear weather following the storm to look up and see Earth burning green there on the windy sky. He put his hand up for a moment, as one might reach up a hand to adjust a dimly burning light globe in the ceiling of a dark room. Then he said something, quietly, and looked across the long dead sea bottom not moving. Not another living thing on this entire planet, he thought. Just myself. And then. He looked back inside the stone hut.

What was happening on Earth now?

He stared up until his eyes watered with strain. Had the atom bomb eaten everybody there? He had seen no visible sign of change in the aspect of Earth through his thirty-inch telescope. Well, he thought, he was good for another twenty years if he was careful. Someone might come. Either across the dead seas, or out of space in a rocket, on a little thread of red flame.

He peered into the hut. "I think I'll take a walk," he said.

His wife did not turn.

"I said," he cried, "I think I'll take a walk."

"All right," his wife said.

"That's better," said Hathaway.

He turned and walked quietly down through a series of low ruins. "Made in New York," he read from a piece of metal as he passed. "This will all be gone long before the old Martian ruins." He waved at a city ten thousand years old, intact, that lay on the rim of the dead sea twenty miles over, in a mist. "Did anything like that ever happen on Earth? Well, the Egyptians, almost. They came nearest, because they took their time."

He quieted. He came to the Martian graveyard. It was a series of small hexagonal stones and buildings set in the top of a hill. The drifting sand had never covered them because the hill was too high and swept by the winds.

There were four graves with crude wooden crosses on them, and names. He stood for a moment looking down at them. He did nothing with his eyes, they would do nothing. They had dried up long ago.

"Do you forgive me for what I have done?" he asked of the crosses. "I had to do it. I was so lonely," he said. "You do forgive me, don't you? You don't mind. No. No, you don't mind. I'm glad."

He walked back down the hill, looking at the sea bottom. If only something would come; even a monster of some sort would be welcome. Something to run from, perhaps, would be a change.

He reached the stone hut and, once more, just before going inside, he shaded his eyes with his hands, searching the sky.

"You keep waiting and waiting and looking and looking," he said. "And one night, perhaps—"

There was a tiny point of red flame on the sky.

"And you keep looking," he said. "And you look," he said. He stopped. He looked down at the ground. Then he stepped away from the light of the stone hut. "—and you look again," he whispered.

The tiny flame point was still there.

"It wasn't there last night," he murmured.

"It is red," he said, finally.

And then his eyes were wet with pain.

"It is a rocket," he said. "My telescope." He stumbled and fell, picked himself up, got around back of the hut and swiveled the telescope so that it pointed into the sky.

A minute later, after a long wild staring, he appeared in the low doorway and he came in to sit by the fireplace. He looked at the fire. The wife and the two daughters and the son looked at him. Finally he said, "I have good news. A ship is coming to take us all home. It will be here in the early morning."

He put his hands down and put his head into his hands and began to cry, gently, with long waiting pain, like a child.

He burned what was left of New York that morning at three.

He took a torch and moved into the plastic and wood city and tapped the walls here or there and the city went up in great tosses of heat and light. When he walked back out of the city it was a square mile of illumination, big enough to be seen out in space. It would beckon the rocket down to him and his family.

His heart beating rapidly, he turned to the hut where the family waited. "See," he said. He held up an old bottle into the light. "Wine I saved. Just for to-night. I knew that perhaps

one day someone would come. And so I saved this. I hid it in the storage shed. We'll have a drink and celebrate! And he popped the cork out and poured five glasses full. His wife and the three children picked up their glasses, smiling.

"It's been a long time," he said gravely, looking into his drink. "Remember the day the War broke? How long ago? Nineteen years and seven months, exactly. And all the rockets were called home from Mars, and you and I and the children were out in the mountains, doing archaeological work, doing research on the ancient methods of surgery used by the Martians; it helped me a lot in my own work. And we ran our horses, almost killing them, but got back here to the city a week late. Everyone was gone. America had been destroyed; every rocket had left without waiting for stragglers, remember, remember? And, it turned out, we were the only ones left? Lord, Lord, how the years pass. It seems only a day, now. I couldn't have stood it without you here, all of you. I couldn't have stood it at all. I'd have killed myself without you. But, with you, it was worth waiting. Here's to us, then." He raised his drink. "And to our long wait together. And here's to them." He gestured at the sky. "May they land safely and—" A troubled frown.

"—may they be friends to us when they land." He drank his wine.

The wife and the three children raised their glasses to their lips.

The wine ran down over the chins of all four of them.

By morning the city was blowing in great black soft flakes across the sea bottom. The fire was exhausted, but it had served its purpose; the red spot on the sky enlarged and came down.

From the stone hut came the rich brown smell of baked ginger bread. His wife stood over the table, setting down the hot pans of new bread as Hathaway entered. The two daughters were gently sweeping the bare stone floor with stiff brooms, and the son

was polishing the silverware. "We will have a breakfast for them, for everyone in the crew," said Hathaway. "You must all put on your best clothes."

He walked across his land to the vast metal storage shed. Inside was the cold storage unit and power plant he had repaired and restored with his efficient, small, nervous fingers over the years, just as he had repaired clocks and telephones and spool recorders in his spare time. The shed was full of things he had built, some of them senseless mechanisms the functions of which were a mystery even to himself now as he looked at them. There were jars of liquid and jars of gelatin and other substances.

One day, just for a joke, he had laid telephone wires all the way from the hut to the dead city twenty miles away. He had installed a phone in an empty Martian tower room of the highest cupola in the city and come back, whistling quietly to a freshly fixed dinner of cold storage turnips and filet mignon. Many nights, for the hell of it, he dialed the dead city number, which, with a shine to his eye, he had fixed at 00-000-00.

It would have been interesting if someone had answered.

From the storage deep freeze compartment he now carried frozen cartons of beans and strawberries, twenty years old. Lazarus, come forth, he thought, as he pulled out a cool chicken.

Then the Rocket landed.

Hathaway ran down the hill like a young boy. He had to stop once, because of a sudden sickening pain in his chest. He sat on a rock and breathed out and in. Then he got up and ran all the rest of the way.

"Hello, hello!"

He stood in the hot air of summer that had been caused by the fiery heat of the rocket exhausts. A vent opened in the side of the rocket and a man stood in the round entrance looking down.

"You're an American!" the man shouted.

"So are you; hello!" cried Hathaway, pink-cheeked.

"Well, I'll be damned!" The man leaped down and walked across the sand swiftly, his hand out. "We expected nothing, and here you are!"

Their hands clasped and held, they looked into each other's faces.

"Why, you're Hathaway. I know you." The man was amazed. His grip tightened. His mouth was open and shut and open again, speechless. "Hathaway! When I was a kid, twenty years ago, I saw you in the television set at school. I watched you perform a difficult surgery for a cerebral tumor!"

"Thank you thank you, I had almost forgotten."

The man from the rocket looked beyond Hathaway. "You're alone? Your wife, I remember her. And there were children—"

"My son, my daughters, my wife, they are at our hut."

"Good, good, splendid. You look fine, sir."

"Cold storage and a lot of work. I've kept myself busy. I've had time for my hobbies. I was always interested in machines as they relate to physiology and physiology as it relates to machines, you know. But, your name?"

"Captain Ernest Parsons of Joliet, Illinois, sir."

"Captain Parsons," They were not done with the hand-shaking yet. "How many in your crew?" "Twenty, sir." "Fine, there's a good breakfast waiting all of you up the hill. Will you come?" "Will we come?" asked the captain. He turned and looked at the rocket. "Abandon ship!" And it was done in half a minute.

They walked up the hill together, Hathaway and the captain, the men following dutifully and talkatively behind, taking in deep breaths of the thin Martian air. The sun rose and it was a good day. It would be warm later. Smoke lifted from the stone hut.

"I'm sorry." Hathaway sat down, his hand on his chest. "All the excitement. I'll have to wait." He felt his heart moving under his hand. He counted the beats. It was not good.

"We have a doctor with us," said Parsons. "I beg your pardon, sir, I know you are one, but we'd best check you with our own, and if you need anything—"

"I'll be all right, the excitement, the waiting." Hathaway could hardly breathe. His face was pale and wet, his lips blue. His hand trembled. "You know," he said, as the doctor came up and put a stethoscope against him, "it's as if I've kept alive just for this day, all those years, and now that you're here and I know Earth is still alive—well, I can lie down and quit."

"You can't do that, sir, there's the breakfast to eat," insisted Parsons, gently. "A fine host that would be."

"Here we are," and the doctor gave Hathaway a small yellow pellet. "I suggest this. You're badly over-excited. It might be a good idea if we carried you the rest of the way."

"Nonsense, just let me sit here a moment. It's good to see you all. It's good to hear your names. What were they again? You introduced me, but when you're excited you don't see or hear or do anything right. Parsons and Glasbow and Williamson and Hamilton and Spaulding and Ellison and Smith and someone named Brackett and that's all I remember." He smiled weakly, his eyes squinted. "See how good I am?"

"Splendid. Did the pellet work?"

"Well enough. Here we go."

They walked on up the hill.

"Alice, come out and see who we have here," Hathaway called into the hut. The men of the rocket stood waiting and smiling. Hathaway frowned slightly and bent into the doorway once more. "Alice, did you hear, come out now."

His wife appeared in the doorway. A moment later the two daughters,

tall and gracious, came out, followed by an even taller son.

"Captain Parsons, my wife. Alice, this is Captain Parsons."

"Mrs. Hathaway, I remember you from a long time ago."

"Captain Parsons." She shook his hand and turned, still holding his hand, "My daughters, Maguerite and Susan. My son, John. Captain Parsons."

Hathaway stood smiling as hands were shaken all around.

"It's like coming home," said Parsons, simply.

"It's like home having you," said the wife.

Parsons sniffed the air. "Is that gingerbread?"

"Will you have a piece?"

Everybody laughed. And while folding tables were carried down and foods were brought out and set down and plates were placed about with fine silverware and damask napkins, Captain Parsons looked first at Mrs. Hathaway and then at her son and then at her two tall, gracious daughters. He sat upon a folding chair which the son brought him and said, "How old are you, son?"

The son replied, "Twenty-three."

Parsons said nothing else. He looked down at his silverware but his face grew pale and sickly. Hathaway was helping his wife bring out more tureens of food. The man next to Parsons said, "Sir, that can't be right."

"What's that, Williamson? . . ." asked Parsons.

"I'm thirty-eight myself, sir. I was in school the same time as young John Hathaway there, twenty years ago. And he says he's only twenty-three. And, by God, he only looks twenty-three. But that can't be right. He should be thirty-eight."

"Yes, I know," said Parsons, quietly.

"What does it mean, sir?"

"I don't know."

"You don't look well, sir."

"I'm not feeling very well. Will you do me a favour?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to run a little errand for me. I'll tell you where to go and what to check. Late in the breakfast, slip away. It should take you only five minutes. The place is not far from here."

"Yes, sir."

"Here, what are you two talking so seriously about?" Mrs. Hathaway ladled quick ladles of soup into their bowls. "Smile now, we're all together the trip's over, and it's like home!"

"Yes, Ma'm," said Captain Parsons. "You look very young, Mrs. Hathaway, I hope you don't mind my saying."

"Isn't that like a man?" And she gave him an extra ladle of soup.

Parsons watched her move away. Her face was filled with warmth, it was smooth and unwrinkled. She moved around the tables and placed things neatly and laughed at every joke. She stopped never once to sit and take her breath. And the son and daughters were brilliant and witty as their father, telling of the long years and their quiet life.

The breakfast went through its courses. Midway, Williamson slipped quietly off and walked down the hill. "Where is he going so suddenly?" inquired Hathaway.

"He'll be right back. There's some stuff he's to check in the rocket," explained Parsons. "But, as I was saying, sir, there wasn't much left of America. The grass country towns, was about all. New York was a wreck. It took twenty years to get things back on an even keel, what with the radio-activity and all. Europe wasn't any better off. But we finally have a World Government."

Parsons talked automatically, reading it off from memory, not listening to himself, thinking only of Williamson going down the hill and coming back to tell what he had found. "Ours is the only rocket now available," said Parsons. "There'll be more in about four years. We're here on a pre-

liminary survey to see what's left of our colonies. Not much here. Perhaps more over at New Chicago. We'll check there this afternoon.

"Thanks," he said, as Marguerite Hathaway filled his water glass. He touched her hand, suddenly. She did not even mind it. Her hand was warm. "Incredible," thought Parsons.

Hathaway, at the head of the table, paused long enough to press his hand to his chest. Then he went on, listening to the talk, looking now and then, with concern, at Parsons, who did not seem to be enjoying his meal.

Williamson returned up the hill, in a great hurry.

Williamson sat down beside Parson. He was agitated and his cheeks were white. He could not keep his mind on his food, he kept picking at it until the captain whispered aside to him, "Well?"

"I found it, sir, what you sent me to find, sir."

"And?"

"I went down the hill and up that other hill until I came to the graveyard, as you directed." Williamson kept his eyes on the party. People were laughing. The daughters were smiling gravely and blinking and the son was telling a joke. Hathaway was smoking a cigarette, his first really fresh one in years. "And," said Williamson, "I went into the graveyard."

"The four crosses were there?" asked Parsons.

"The four crosses were there, sir. The names were still on them. I wrote them down to be sure." He produced a white paper and read from it. "Alice Hathaway, Marguerite, Susan and John Hathaway. All four died of the plague in July, 1997."

"Thank you, Williamson," said Parsons. He closed his eyes.

"Twenty years ago, sir," said Williamson, his hands trembling. He was afraid to look up at the people at the table.

"Yes, twenty years ago," said Parsons.

"Then, who are these?" And Williamson, wide-eyed, nodded at the two daughters and the son and the wife of Hathaway, the last man on Mars.

"I don't know, Williamson."

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"I don't know that either," he said, slowly.

"Will we tell the other men?"

"No, not yet. Later. Go on with your food as if nothing had happened."

"I'm not very hungry now, sir."

They both began on their dessert.

The meal ended with wine brought from the rocket. Hathaway rose to his feet, holding his glass. "A toast to all of you, it is good to be with friends again." He moved his wine glass ever so little in the air. "And to my wife, and my children, without whom I could not have survived alone. It is only through their kindness in caring for me that I have lived on, waiting for your arrival. Else, years ago, I would have put a bullet in my head." He moved his glass now to his wife, now to his children, who looked back self-consciously, lowering their eyes at last as everyone drank.

Parsons's eyelids were flickering nervously. His hands were moving uneasily on his lap.

Hathaway drank down his wine and fell forward on to the table and then slipped toward the ground. He did not cry out. Several of the men caught and eased him to the ground where the doctor felt of his chest, listened, and remained there, listening, until Parsons arrived with Williamson.

The doctor looked up and shook his head. Parsons knelt and took the old man's hand. "Parsons, is that you?" Hathaway's voice was barely audible. Parsons nodded. "I'm sorry," said Hathaway, gently grieved. "I had to spoil the breakfast."

"Never you mind," said Parsons. "Say goodbye to Alice and the children for me," said the old man. "They're right here," said Parsons. "Just a moment, I'll call them."

"No, no, don't; they wouldn't understand, I wouldn't want them to understand, no, don't," whispered Hathaway. Parsons did not move.

A moment later old Dr. Hathaway was dead.

Parsons waited for a long time. Then he arose and walked away from the small stunned group around Hathaway. He went to Alice Hathaway and looked into her face and said, "Do you know what has just happened?"

"It's something about my husband," she said.

"He's just passed away; his heart," said Parsons, watching her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"He didn't want us to feel badly, he told us it would happen one day, and he didn't want us to cry. He didn't teach us how, you know. He didn't want us to know, he said it was the worst thing that could happen to a man to know how to be lonely and to know how to be sad and then cry. So we're not to know what death is or what crying is or being sad."

Parsons looked off at the mountains. "Perhaps it's just as well." He glanced at her hands, the soft warm hands and the fine manicured nails and the tapered wrists. And he looked at the slender smooth white neck and the intelligent eyes. "I know all about you," he said, finally.

"But the others don't." She was confident of that.

"No, you're so perfect they haven't guessed. Mr. Hathaway did a fine job on you and your children."

"He would have liked to hear you say that. He was so very proud of us. After a while he even forgot that he had made us. At the end he loved and took us as his real wife and children. And, in a way, we are."

"You gave him a great deal of comfort," said Parsons.

"Yes, over the years we sat and talked and talked. He so much loved

to talk. He liked the stone hut and the open fire. We could have lived in a regular house in the town, but he liked it up here, where he could be primitive if he liked, or modern if he liked. He told me all about his laboratory and the things he did in it. Once he wired the entire dead American town below with sound speakers and when he pressed a button the town lit up and made noises as if ten thousand people lived in it. There were airplane noises and car noises and the sounds of people talking. He would sit and light a cigar and talk to us and the sounds would come up from the town and once in a while the phone would ring and a recorded voice, Mr. Hathaway himself, would ask Mr. Hathaway scientific and surgical questions and he would answer them, and then I'd make strawberry biscuits. Mr. Hathaway took a transcription of his voice down into town each day, put it in an automatic telephone that called us every night. And with the phone ringing and us here and the sounds of the town and the cigar, I'm sure Mr. Hathaway was quite happy."

"Twenty years, the five of you living here," said Parsons.

"There's only one thing he couldn't make us do," she said. "And that was grow old. He got older every day, but we stayed the same. I guess he didn't mind. I guess he wanted us that way."

"We'll bury him down in the yard where the other four crosses are. I think he would like that."

She put her hand on his wrist, lightly. "I'm sure he would."

Orders were given. The wife and the three children followed the little procession down the hill. Two men carried Hathaway on a covered stretcher. They passed the stone hut and the storage shed where Hathaway twenty years ago had begun his work. Parsons stepped from the procession for a moment to stand within the doorway of the workshop.

How would it be to be alone on a planet with a wife and three

children and then to have them die of the plague, leaving you alone in a world with nothing on it but wind and silence? What would you do? You would bury them with crosses in the graveyard and then come back up to your workshop and with all the power of mind and memory and accuracy of finger and genius, put together, bit by bit, all those things that were wife, son, and daughter.

With an entire American city below from which to draw needed supplies, a brilliant man might do anything.

Parsons returned to the procession. The sound of their footsteps was muffled in the sand. At the graveyard, as they turned in, two men were already spading out the earth.

The men came back to the rocket in the late afternoon. They stood in a circle around the captain.

Williamson nodded up at the stone hut. "What are you going to do about them?"

"I don't know," said the captain.

"Are you going to turn them off?"

"Off?" The captain looked faintly surprised. "It never entered my mind."

"You're not going to take them back with us?"

"No, we haven't space for them."

"You mean you're going to leave them here, like that, like they are? It's sort of ghastly, the thought of them being here."

The captain gave Smith a gun. "If you can do something about this, you're a better man than I."

Five minutes later, Williamson returned from the hut, sweating. He handed the gun back. Here. Take it. I know what you mean, now. I went in with the gun. One of the daughters looked up at me. She smiled. So did the others. The wife said something about sitting down for a cup of tea. That did it. God, God, it would be murder." He shook his head.

Parsons nodded. "After all the

work he put in on them, it would be killing. There'll never be anything as fine as them again, ever. They're built to last; ten, fifty, two hundred years. Yes, they've as much right to live as you or I or any of us." He knocked out his pipe. "Well, get aboard. We're taking off. This city's done for, we'll not be using it."

It was getting late in the day. The wind was rising. All the men were aboard. The captain hesitated. Williamson looked at him and said, "Don't tell me you're going back to say—good-bye—to them?"

The captain looked at Williamson coldly. "None of your damn business."

Parsons walked up toward the hut through the darkening wind. The men in the rocket saw his shadow lingering inside the stone hut door. They saw a woman's shadow. They saw the captain put out his hand to shake her hand.

A minute later, he came running back to the rocket.

The rocket went up into the sky. It was only a red point, going away.

And now, on nights when the wind comes over the dead sea bottoms and through the hexagonal graveyard where there are four old crosses and one new fresh one, there is a light burning in the low stone hut on the edge of the burned New New York, and in that hut, as the wind roars by and the dust sifts down and the cold stars burn, are four figures, a woman, two daughters and a son, tending a low fire for no reason and talking and laughing, and this goes on night after night for every year and every year, and some nights, for no reason, the wife comes out and looks at the sky, her hands up, for a long moment, looking at the green burning of Earth, not knowing why she looks, knowing nothing, and then she goes back in and throws a stick on the fire and the wind comes up and the dead sea goes on being dead.

THE END

FLAW

By JOHN D. MACDONALD

It was more than a flaw in theory; it was the end of man's hopes.

I RATHER imagine that I am quite mad.

Nothing spectacular, you understand. Nothing calling for restraint, or shock therapy. I can live on, dangerous to no one but myself.

This beach house at La Jolla is comfortable. At night I sit on the rocks and watch the distant stars and think of Johnny. He probably wouldn't like the way I look now. My fingernails are cracked and broken and there are streaks of grey in my blonde hair. I no longer use make-up. Last night I looked at myself in the mirror and my eyes were dead.

It was then that I decided that it might help me to write all this down. I have no idea what I'll do with it.

You see, I shared Johnny's dreams.

And now I know that those dreams are no longer possible. I wonder if he learned how impossible they were in the few seconds before his flaming death.

There have always been people like Johnny and me. For a thousand years mankind has looked at the stars and thought of reaching them. The stars were to be the new frontier, the new worlds on which mankind could expand and find the full promise of the human soul.

I never thought much about it until I met Johnny. Five years ago. My name is Carol Adlar. At that time I was a government clerk working in the offices at the rocket station in Arizona. It was 1959. The year before the atomic drive was perfected.

Johnny Pritchard. I figured him him out, I thought. A good-looking boy with dark hair and careless grin and a swagger. That's all I saw in the beginning. The hot sun blazed down on the rocks and the evenings were cool and clear.

There were a lot of boys like Johnny at the rocket station—transferred from Air Corps work. Volunteers. You couldn't order a man off the surface of the earth in a rocket.

The heart is ever cautious. Johnny Pritchard began to hang around my desk, a warm look in his eyes. I was as cool as I could be. You don't give your heart to a man who soars up at the tip of a comet plume. But I did.

I told myself that I would go out with him one evening and I would be so cool to him that it would cure him and he would stop bothering me. I expected him to drive me to the city in his little car. Instead we drove only five miles from the compound, parked on the brow of a hill looking across the moon-silvered rock and sand.

At first I was defensive, until I found all he wanted to do was to talk. He talked about the stars. He talked in a low voice that was somehow tense with his visions. I found out that first evening that he wasn't like the others. He wasn't merely one of those young men with perfect coordination and high courage. Johnny had in him the blood of pioneers. And his frontier was the stars.

"You see, Carol," he said, "I didn't know a darn thing about the upstairs at the time of my transfer. I guess I

don't know much right now. Less, probably, than the youngest astronomer or physicist on the base. But I'm learning. I spend every minute I can spare studying about it. Carol, I'm going upstairs some day. Right out into space. And I want to know about it. I want to know all about it.

"We've made a pretty general mess of this planet. I sort of figure that the powers-that-be planned it that way. They said, 'We'll give this puny little fella called man a chance to mess up one planet and mess it up good. But we'll let him slowly learn how to travel to another. Then, by the time he can migrate, he will be smart enough to turn the next planet into the sort of deal we wanted him to have in the beginning. A happy world with no wars, no disease, no starvation.'"

I should have said something flip at that point, but the words weren't in me. Like a fool, I asked him questions about the galaxies, about the distant stars. We drove slowly back. The next day he loaned me two of his books. Within a week I had caught his fervor, his sense of dedication.

After that it was, of course, too late.

All persons in love have dreams. This was ours. Johnny would be at the controls of one of the first interplanetary rockets. He would return to me and then we would become one of the first couples to become colonists for the new world.

Silly, wasn't it?

He told me of the problems that would be solved with that first interplanetary flight. They would take instruments far enough out into space so that triangulation could solve that tiresome bickering among the physicists and astronomers about the theory of the exploding universe as against the theory of "tired light" from the distant galaxies.

And now I am the only person in the world who can solve that problem. Oh, the others will find the

answer soon enough. And then they, too, can go quietly mad.

They will find out that for years they have been in the position of the man at the table with his fingers almost touching the sugar bowl and who asks why there isn't any sugar on the table.

That year was the most perfect year of my life.

"When are you going to marry me, Johnny?" I asked him.

"This is so sudden," he said laughing. Then he sobered. "Just as soon as I come back from the first one, honey. It isn't fair any other way. Don't you see?"

I saw with my mind, but not with my heart. We exchanged rings. All very sentimental. He gave me a diamond and I gave him my father's ring, the one that was sent home to my mother and me when Dad was killed in Burma in World War II. It fitted him and he liked it. It was a star ruby in a heavy silver setting. The star was perfect, but by looking closely into the stone you could see the flaws. Two dark little dots and a tiny curved line which together gave the look of a small and smiling face.

With his arm around me, with the cool night air of Arizona touching our faces, we looked up at the sky and talked of the home we would make millions of miles away.

Childish, wasn't it?

Last night after looking in the mirror, I walked down to the rocks. The Government money was given to me when Johnny didn't come back. It is enough. It will last until I die and I hope it will not be too long before I die.

The sea, washing the rocks, asked me the soft, constant question: "Why? Why? Why?" I looked at the sky. The answer was not there.

Fourteen months after I met Johnny, a crew of two in the Destiny I made the famous circuit of the moon and landed safely. Johnny was not one of them. He had hoped to be.

"A test run," he called it. The first step up the long flight of stairs.

You certainly remember the head-

lines given that flight of Destiny I. Even the "New York Times" broke out a new and larger type face for the headlines. Korby and Sweeny became the heroes of the entire world.

The world was confident, then. The intervening years have shaken that confidence. But the world does not know yet. I think some suspect, but they do not know. Only I know for a certainty. And I, of course, am quite mad. I know that now.

Call it a broken heart—or broken dreams.

Johnny was selected for Destiny II. After he told me and after the tears came, partly from fear, partly from the threat of loneliness, he held me tightly and kissed my eyes. I had not known that the flight of Destiny II, if successful, would take fourteen months. The fourteen months were to include a circuit of Mars and a return to the take-off point. Fourteen months before I would see him again. Fourteen months before I would feel his arms around me.

A crew of four. The famous Korby and Sweeny, plus Anthony Marinetta and my Johnny. Each morning when I went to work I could see the cast silver ship on the horizon, the early sun glinting on the blunt nose. Johnny's ship.

Those last five months before take-off were like the five months of life ahead of a prisoner facing execution. And Johnny's training was so intensified after his selection that I couldn't see him as often as before.

We were young and we were in love and we made our inevitable mistake. At least we called it a mistake. Now I know that it wasn't, because Johnny didn't come back.

With the usual sense of guilt, we planned to be married, and then reverted to our original plan. I would wait for him. Nothing could go wrong.

Take-off was in the cold dawn of a February morning. I stood in the crowd beside a girl who worked in the same office. I held her arm. She carried the bruises for over a week.

The silver hull seemed to merge with the grey of the dawn. The crowd was silent. At last there was the blinding, blue-white flare of the jets, the stately lift into the air, the moment when Destiny II seemed to hang motionless 50 feet in the air, and then the accelerating blast that arched it up and up into the dark-grey sky where a few stars still shone. I walked on leaden legs back to the administration building and sat slumped at my desk, my mouth dry, my eyes hot and burning.

The last faint radio signal came in three hours later.

"All well. See you next year."

From then on there would be fourteen months of silence.

I suppose that in a way I became accustomed to it.

I was numb, apathetic, stupefied. They would probably have got rid of me had they not known how it was between Johnny and me. I wouldn't have blamed them. Each morning I saw the silver form of Destiny III taking shape near where Destiny II had taken off. The brash young men made the same jokes, gave the office girls the same line of chatter.

But they didn't bother me. Word had got around.

I found a friend. The young wife of Tony Marinetta. We spent hours telling each other in subtle ways that everything would come out all right.

I remember one night when Marge grinned and said:—

"Well anyway, Carol, nobody has ever had their men go quite so far away."

There is something helpless about thinking of the distance between two people in the form of millions of miles.

After I listened to the sea last night, I walked slowly back up the steep path to this beach house. When I clicked the lights on Johnny looked at me out of the silver frame on my writing desk. His eyes are on me as I write this. They are happy and confident eyes. I am almost glad that he didn't live to find out.

The fourteen months were like one

single revolution of a gigantic Ferris wheel. You start at the top of the wheel, and through seven months the wheel carries you slowly down into the darkness and the fear. Then, after you are at your lowest point, the wheel slowly starts to carry you back up into the light.

Somewhere in space I knew that Johnny looked at the small screen built into the control panel and saw the small bright sphere of earth and thought of me. I knew all during that fourteen months that he wasn't dead. If he had died, no matter how many million miles away from me, I would have known it in the instant of his dying.

The world forgets quickly. The world had pushed Destiny II off the surface of consciousness a few months after takeoff. Two months before the estimated date of return, it began to creep back into the papers and on to the telescreens of the world.

Work had stopped on Destiny III. The report of the four crewmen might give a clue to alterations in the interior.

It was odd the way I felt. As though I had been frozen under the transparent ice of a small lake. Spring was coming and the ice grew thinner.

Each night I went to sleep thinking of Johnny driving down through the sky toward me at almost incalculable speed. Closer, closer, ever closer.

It was five weeks before the date when they were due to return. I was asleep in the barracks-like building assigned to the unmarried women of the base.

The great thud and jar woke me up and through the window I saw the night sky darkening in the afterglow of some brilliant light.

We gathered by the windows and talked for a long time about what it could have been. It was in all of our minds that it could have been the return of Destiny II, but we didn't put it into words, because no safe landing could have resulted in that deathly thud.

With the lights out again, I tried to sleep. I reached out into the night

sky with my heart, trying to contact Johnny.

And the sky was empty.

I sat up suddenly, my lips numb, my eyes staring. No. It was imagination. It was illusion. Johnny was still alive. Of course. But when I composed myself for sleep it was as though dirges were softly playing. In all the universe there was no living entity called Johnny Pritchard. Nowhere.

The telescreens were busy the next morning and I saw the shape of fear. An alert operator had caught the fast shape as it had slammed flaming down through the atmosphere to land forty miles from the base in deserted country making a crater a half-mile across.

"It is believed that the object was a meteor," the voice of the announcer said. "Radar screens picked up the image and it is now known that it was far too large to be the Destiny II arriving ahead of schedule."

It was then that I took a deep breath. But the relief was not real. I was only kidding myself. It was as though I was in the midst of a dream of terror and could not think of magic words to cause the spell to cease.

After breakfast I was ill.

The meteor had hit with such impact that the heat generated had fused the sand. Scientific instruments proved that the mass of the meteor itself, nine hundred feet under the surface, was largely metallic. The telescreens began to prattle about invaders from an alien planet. And the big telescopes scanned the heavens for the first signs of the returning Destiny II.

The thought began as a small spot, glowing in some deep part of my mind. I knew that I had to cross the forty miles between the base and the crater. But I did not know why I had to cross it. I did not know why I had to stand at the lip of the crater and watch the recovery operations. I felt like a subject under post-hypnotic influence—compelled to do something without knowing the reason. But compelled nevertheless.

One of the physicists took me to the crater in one of the base helicopters after I had made the request of him in such a way that he could not refuse.

Eleven days after the meteor had fallen, I stood on the lip of the crater and looked down into the heart of it to where the vast shaft had been sunk to the meteor itself. Dr. Rawlins handed me his binoculars and I watched the mouth of the shaft.

Men working down in the shaft had cut away large pieces of the body of the meteor and some of them had been hauled out and trucked away. They were blackened and misshapen masses of fused metal.

I watched the mouth of the shaft until my eyes ached and until the young physicist shifted restlessly and kept glancing at his watch and at the sun sinking toward the west. When he asked to borrow the binoculars, I gave them up reluctantly. I could hear the distant throb of the hoist motors. Something was coming up the shaft.

Dr. Rawlins made a sudden exclamation. I looked at the mouth of the shaft. The sun shone with red fire on something large. It dwarfed the men who stood near it.

Rudely I snatched the binoculars from Dr. Rawlins and looked, knowing even as I lifted them to my eyes what I would see.

Because at that moment I knew the answer to something that he astronomers and physicists had been bickering about for many years. There is no expanding universe. There is no tired light.

As I sit here at my writing desk, I can imagine how it was during those last few seconds. The earth looming up in the screen on the instrument panel, but not nearly large enough. Not large enough at all. Incredulity, then, because of the error in size, the sud-

den application of the nose jets. Too late. Fire and oblivion and a thud that shook the earth for hundreds of miles.

No one else knows what I know. Maybe soon they will guess. And then there will be an end to the proud dreams of migration to other worlds. We are trapped here. There will be no other worlds for us. We have made a mess of this planet, and it is something that we cannot leave behind us. We must stay and clean it up as best we can.

Maybe a few of them already know. Maybe they have guessed. Maybe they guessed as I did, on the basis of the single object that was brought up out of that shaft on that bright, cold afternoon.

Yes, I saw the sun shining on the six-pointed star. With the binoculars I looked into the heart of it and saw the two dots and a curved line that made the flaws look like a smiling face. A ruby the size of a bungalow.

There is no expanding universe. There is no "tired light." There is only a Solar system that, due to an unknown influence, is constantly shrinking.

For a little time the Destiny II avoided that influence. That is why they arrived too soon, why they couldn't avoid the crash, and why I am quite mad.

The ruby was the size of a bungalow, but it was, of course, quite unchanged. It was I and my world that had shrunk.

If Johnny had landed safely, I would be able to walk about on the palm of his hand.

It is a good thing that he died. And it will not be long before I die also.

The sea whispers softly against the rocks a hundred yards from the steps of my beach house.

And Destiny III has not returned. It is due in three months.

THE END

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